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NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

HORACE, *ARS POETICA* 179 ff.

Aut agitur res in scaenis, aut acta refertur.
Segnius irritant animos demissa per aurem
Quam quae sunt oculis subiecta fidelibus et quae
Ipse sibi tradit spectator. Non tamen intus
Digna geri promes in scaenam, multaque tolles
Ex oculis quae mox narret facundia praesens,
Ne pueros coram populo Medea trucidet,
Aut humana palam coquat exta nefarius Atreus,
Aut in avem Proene vertatur, Cadmus in anguem.
Quodecumque ostendis mihi sic, incredulus odi.

In this short passage three points are made:

1. An episode may either be portrayed upon the stage, or a messenger may report it as having taken place elsewhere.
2. The former method makes a more direct and stirring appeal to the feelings of the spectators.
3. But some actions are so revolting and incredible that the dramatist defeats his own ends, if he attempts to bring them upon the stage.

The older commentators have little to say on this passage, and that little has to do with the general outline of the thought. Later editors are prone to make the lines a text for discussion of the relative merits of the senses of sight and hearing. That this is not the point with which Horace here is chiefly concerned is shown, among other things, by the first illustration he chooses, namely, the murder of her children by Medea. Obviously he is not considering the merits of presenting the action to the *view* of the spectators, as against letting them *hear* frightful screams, the thud of falling bodies, and dying moans behind the scenes. This second course, though appealing only to the sense of hearing, would doubtless stir mightily the imaginations and feelings of the audience.

The contrast Horace has in mind is between seeing the action portrayed upon the stage and listening to a messenger describe it. This is an entirely different matter; and he has chosen some rather happy phrases in this connection (*quae . . . ipse sibi tradit spectator*, as against *demissa per aurem*).

It will be noted that, in line 181, the omission of the word *fidelibus* would not affect the general sense of the passage at all. The addition of the word may mean that Horace felt it to be an appropriate stock epithet, or that he is trying here to say two things at once. In either case, modern editors have

some excuse for introducing a *supplementary* note on the relative merits of the senses of sight and hearing.

It is little wonder that the ancients so generally and so readily admitted the superiority of sight. Even for a modern it is easy to overrate it. Watching a distant flash and hearing the later report, it is not so hard to conceive of wave-lengths transmitted through the air, bringing an impulse to the ear that the brain interprets as "sound"; but when the eyelids open and a panorama unfolds itself, there is an instinctive sense of "being in touch" with things. It is hard to realize that, if the sun were suddenly blotted from the heavens, the stimuli would continue to come for some minutes, and that a person looking in that direction would still "see" the sun, and would suffer ruin of his vision if he did not turn his eyes away from the "sight."

In this connection, Cicero has an interesting passage in the *Tusculan Disputations*, in which he recognizes all the sense organs (including the eyes) as mere receivers of stimuli that have to be transmitted to the brain for interpretation. To quote him exactly (i. 20. 46):

Nos enim ne nunc quidem oculis cernimus ea, quae videmus; neque est enim ullus sensus in corpore, sed, ut non physici solum docent, verum etiam medici, qui ista aperta et patefacta viderunt, viae quasi quaedam sunt ad oculos, ad aures, ad naris a sede animi perforatae. Itaque saepe aut cogitatione aut aliqua vi morbi impediti apertis atque integris et oculis et auribus nec videmus nec audimus.

In the same passage, a little farther along, he speaks of the mind as sitting at the center of things, passing judgment upon and classifying the various messages that come in.

This whole topic is well worth study; but that there is some danger in introducing it in connection with the Horatian passage is shown, for example, by the notes in Kiessling's edition. There two very distinct questions are badly confused. For the editor interprets *segnius irritant* in terms of the sense of hearing (*denn auf dem längeren Wege durch das Ohr schwächt die Wirkung ab*); but later he reverts to *demissa per aurem*, giving it the correct interpretation (*durch eines andern Rede vermittelt*).

One other point needs mention. The spectator uses *both eyes and ears* in each of the two cases supposed by Horace, namely, when action is going forward upon the stage, and when a messenger is narrating what occurred elsewhere. It is true that the audience will depend upon its sight more in the first case; but, if the messenger puts any life into his narration, he will have something for the eye as well as for the ear of the spectator.

The contrast which Horace had in mind is well illustrated by Plautus, *Truc.* 489-90:

Pluris est oculatus testis unus quam auriti decem.
Qui audiunt audita dicunt, qui vident plane sciunt.

This is part of a monologue on the part of the soldier Stratophanes, who explains to the audience that he will not relate his exploits, because he prefers to have people see him in action than to tell them about his prowess. In the one case the audience would be *oculatus testis*, in the other merely *auritus*. In other words, the *testis oculatus* is the man on the spot who uses his own sight, hearing, and perhaps even his sense of touch; the *testis auritus* is one who gets his information at second hand. In this passage, as often elsewhere, the verb *audire* in the first instance means "hear about" and not "hear."

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HORACE'S "SWAN" SONG, *ODES* ii. 20

Humility was not one of the cardinal virtues in the pagan category. One need not object to a literal interpretation of ii. 20 on that score. But in Horace a sense of humor is to be expected. The epilogue of Horace's second book with its cinema-like transfiguration of poet into swan probably hides a joke which his contemporaries understood. Possibly the third stanza contains a parody on some neoteric poem which had repeated the offense of Scylla's unseemly recostuming in the "Ciris," or it may be an allusion to the lost passage on the pavonization of Ennius—whom, of course, Horace did not like. Be that as it may, I would suggest that Horace in this ode is also participating in a jest directed at himself. For what else could one do but smile when a man who is turning corpulent and white-haired at forty hints that he is merely shrinking into a swan? *Spectatum admissi risum teneatis?*

Whether Horace's phrase *album mutor in alitem superne* could suggest gray locks as well as vocal gifts would depend upon how early the expression *cycneum caput* became current. It is an everyday proverb in late Latin. It may have been as common in homely speech in Horace's day without emerging into the literature we happen to have. At any rate it seems to be implied in Ovid's melancholy line (*Tristia* iv. 8. 1),

Jam mea cycneas imitatur tempora plumas,

and even more distinctly in Martial's reference to a gray-haired man as a swan (iii. 43):

Mentiris juvenem tinctis, Laetine, capillis
tam subito corvus, qui modo cycnus eras.

Horace was not unconscious of the premature misbehavior of the locks that once fell black and abundant over his forehead. *Lenit albescens animos capillus*,¹ he wrote of himself at the age of forty, in the same year apparently

¹ See Hor. *Carm.* ii. 11. 15; iii. 14. 25; iii. 19. 25; *Epist.* i. 20. 24; *Epist.* i. 7. 26.